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FORTHCOMING SPECIAL ISSUE: SPATIAL PLANNING
AND PLACE BRANDING: RETHINKING RELATIONS AND
SYNERGIES

 OPEN ACCESS



Linking spatial planning and place branding strategies through cultural narratives in places

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ABSTRACT

Place branding refers to the creation of value in space by reinforcing and representing place assets in a cohesive manner, as a narrative image of the place itself. Such narratives of place are important in planning as well, when developing (strategic) spatial strategies. We argue that place branding and planning can be bridged, through cultural narratives built on local knowledge and the perceived meanings and images of place. However, there is a knowledge gap on how to build cultural narratives in multi-stakeholder processes. While participatory planning methods are increasingly applied, we argue for a greater role of art and arts-based methods. Accordingly, our key question is, how can arts-based methods support the creation of cultural narratives for place branding and planning? To address this question, we outline an approach based on the principles of Appreciative Inquiry. The approach is illustrated through a case study in Finland where we initiated a process of co-creation of place-based narratives. We analyse how the process was organized and facilitated, and what the challenges and lessons learnt were. The paper ends with a discussion, and draws conclusions on the relevance of arts-based methods for the wider debate on place branding and spatial planning.

KEYWORDS

Participatory planning; place branding; narrative; appreciative inquiry; art-based methods; place-based development

1. Introduction

The worldwide integration of economy, culture and politics are increasingly turning places from ‘cultural spaces’ to businesses that are competing for space, resources and capital, driven by market forces, showing a discourse of competitiveness (Bristow, 2005, 2010). This is operationalized in place-branding which broadly speaking refers to the creation of value in space by reinforcing and representing the assets of the place in a cohesive manner. Public authorities have also familiarized themselves with business assumptions

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and techniques, and brought market-based arguments and goals in the planning (Pasquinelli, 2010). Although place branding and spatial planning have different traditions and trajectories (Oliveira & Ashworth, 2017; Van Assche, Beunen, & Lo, 2016), they are both based on place-based assets: physical, economic and cultural. As Van Assche, Beunen and Oliveira mention in the editorial of this special issue, spatial planning and place branding are allies in the discovery and creation of place narratives and assets, as well as in contributing to spatial transformation or the improvement of the socio-spatial and spatial-economic conditions of a place. However, the existing and potential linkages between spatial planning and place branding are yet to be explored by both scientists and policy makers. This requires that they are aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses, and they are brought together as part of spatial governance structures (Go & Trunfio, 2012).

Place and community assets can be explored, analysed, re-configured and developed upon in planning and branding strategies. This process is more effective when it is based on existing local narratives (Jensen, 2007; Sandercock, 2003; Van Assche et al., 2016). Academic interest in the role of narratives in planning has increased in recent years, with planning itself often seen as a form of storytelling (Ameel, 2017; Merkus, de Heer, & Veenswijk, 2014; Throgmorton, 1996). In planning, a variety of narratives occur: those narrated by planners to the public, and those narrated by others (e.g. inhabitants, the press, politicians) about the same area, or about the plan itself (Ameel, 2017). Different actors necessarily tell different stories about the same place, resulting in a number of co-existing, and often competing, narratives (Jensen, 2007). However, this multiplicity of stories and perspectives is not often reflected in the way narratives are used in planning and branding.

Place branding on its own cannot fully contribute to improving the socio-spatial conditions of places, but can be linked to a strategy of economic endogenous development (Pasquinelli, 2010) and it is seen as one of the instruments that spatial planners have called for (Albrechts, 2013). Oliveira and Ashworth (2017, p. 27) even suggest that place branding – integrated as an instrument of strategic spatial planning – can support visionary alignment, social cohesion and civic participation and reinforce place identification and lead to a more harmonized place brand steeped in community stories. Place branding has significantly broadened its scope in recent years from marketing and corporate branding, to include a wide range of issues, and coming close to studies of multi-stakeholder governance and participatory planning (Van Assche & Lo, 2011). While ideally spatial planning and branding should be combined as an integrated strategy, often spatial planning or place branding is more participatory than the other (Van Assche, Beunen, & Oliveira, 2019).

While various forms of participatory planning methods are increasingly applied, we argue that the methodological basis could be extended. In particular, we are interested in creative and art-based methods, the potential of which is acknowledged in reaching dimensions of knowledge and awareness that other methods are unable to (Metzger, 2011; Pearson et al., 2018; Sandercock, 2005). Accordingly, our key question is, 'how can art-based methods support the creation of new cultural narratives for place-based branding and planning?' What are the potential benefits and challenges of using this approach from the point of view of place governance? We illustrate our argument with ongoing research in the small town of Mänttä (Finland), which is undergoing a process of spatial planning at a time in which its identity is shifting from industrial towards a city of art. Here, using art-based processes in dialogue with the city planning, we initiated an experimental exercise in constructing narratives together with residents.

The paper starts in Section 2 with a review of cultural narratives in the nexus of planning and branding and the potential of art-based methods in this context. Then we introduce our proposed methodological approach (Section 3), and illustrate its use in our research in Mänttä (Section 4). The aim is not to discuss the results or outcomes of the process – which at the moment of writing is still ongoing – but rather to reflect from a methodological perspective on the organization of the dialogue as well as the challenges and lessons learnt. Finally, in Section 6 we discuss the value of these methods and the implications for participatory planning and branding.

2. Place branding meets spatial planning via narratives

2.1. *The nexus of place branding and spatial planning*

Despite the increasing interest in place branding practices, there is no widely accepted scientific definition of place branding, due to its cross- and multidisciplinary characteristics (Hankinson, 2010). Authors have for example defined place branding from a geographic perspective (Ashworth, 2009), as well as from a marketing perspective (Govers & Go, 2009). What is common to many definitions is that place branding aims to construct a place image to the benefit of residents, business and visitors (Boisen, Terlouw, Groote, & Couwenberg, 2018). Market-driven and entrepreneurial centred forms of place branding have been accused of being quick-fix solutions in various places, ignoring the complexity of places and culture and overlooking the practical consequences on the social fabric of places (Ashworth, 2012; Colomb, 2011). As Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2008) highlight, place branding requires more than advertising, promotional or communication strategies. When place branding becomes a general recipe, ignoring differences in geographical and socio-political contexts, this can consequently increase the sameness of places instead of contributing to their differentiation (see also Lucarelli & Giovanardi, 2016). Narrow marketing strategies have also been criticized for failing to include residents or private entrepreneurs in branding processes, overlooking their needs, values and interests (Evans, 2003; Johansson, 2012; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015).

The field of place branding has evolved over time, in a way that allows for a much broader understanding of the different assets, of the paths connecting them, and of possibilities for creating new ones and thus creating value (Anholt, 2008; Jensen, 2007). Place branding has even been considered as envisioning new ways for a local society to identify itself, based on the construction of new territorial ideas, signs and practices (Pederson, 2004). In this broad sense place branding is a process of endogenous development building on the resources, assets and values of a territory (Donner, Horlings, Fort, & Vellema, 2017), grounded in the careful analysis of power relations (Throgmorton, 1996). The literature shows that this kind of place branding has to take into account various competing narratives of the identity and qualities of the place (Anholt, 2010; Bianchini & Ghilardi, 2007; Hjortegaard Hansen, 2010; Klanicka et al., 2006). We focus here on branding as a process where an ‘inner’ storyline or narrative is constructed, reflecting people’s stories and perceived images of place, distinguished from the ‘outer’ storyline or narrative, communicated as a brand to the outside world (Domínguez García, Horlings, Swagemakers, & Simón Fernández, 2013; Horlings, 2012).

As Oliveira and Ashworth (2017) argue, place branding strategies should involve spatial planning and spatial development to influence the physical appearance to the place, contributing thereby to improvement of its image. The critical literature on place branding suggests to consider place branding as a collective practice that seeks to define the meaning of the place for its various stakeholders (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012; Zenker & Erfgen, 2014). These views challenge place branding processes to become more inclusive. Yet, a knowledge gap continues to exist on how to engage local actors in inclusive place branding. Previous attempts to strengthen the capacity of place branding to support an endogenous development, by legitimizing emerging social groups and by reinforcing their sense of place, were not always successful, nor they created room for institutional change (see, e.g. Pasquinelli, 2010). Lichrou, Patterson, O'Malley, and O'Leary (2017) therefore plead for an exploration of methodologies that can support inclusive place branding.

When branding expands to ideas on changing or preserving a place and bringing new activities in, and is organized as a multi-stakeholder process, it enters the spatial planning domain. Spatial planning is understood here as spatial governance, the coordination of policies and practices affecting the organization of space (Van Assche et al., 2019). Over the last decades, at least in Western Europe, a technical-rational notion of spatial planning has declined in favour of the more interactive view of collaborative planning (Healey 1997, 1998; Innes, 2016). Collaborative planning has shifted the focus of policy-makers to argumentation, promoting the ideal of collaboration in the wider context of governance approaches (De Jonge, 2016).

However, this general definition of collaborative planning has raised some debatable issues such as the exclusion of specific groups and power imbalances, especially in situations of strong planning administrations. Furthermore, collaborative planning does not guarantee good results, and critics have argued that it reduces the value of expertise and is often misused by powerful groups that are seeking a formal justification for their decisions (see, e.g. De Roo & Silva, 2010, cited in Dobrucká, 2016; Horlings, 2017).

As a response to this critique, spatial planning has moved towards more inclusive strategies, acknowledging the necessary embedding of planning in democratic governance, and its polyphony of discourses (Hillier, 2002), where planners are participants in the process together with other actors, instead of solely directing plans and planning processes (Allmendinger, 2002). A consequence is that planners have to take varied stories and narratives into account and perform different roles beyond the more formal ones; they need a wider portfolio of tools 'beyond the plan' towards an agreed future or ideal (Boelens & De Roo, 2016).

In participatory forms of planning, the role of stakeholders is key, since stakeholders co-construct, give meaning to, and share identities of a place (Domínguez García et al., 2013; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). The building of narratives via a multi-stakeholder processes can coordinate stakeholders and integrate policies (Van Assche & Lo, 2011). The amount and heterogeneity of the public and private actors involved in place branding create a complex context, bringing along power issues (Kneafsey, 2000). This makes it difficult to apply effective interventions and align stakeholders with diverse interests around a joint agenda (Domínguez García et al., 2013). Participation does not mean, however, that a consensus has to be found among all stakeholders (Healey, 1997), but rather it embraces processes which identify and discuss community values, assets and

place perceptions, and it includes the dynamic interaction of diverse intentions, values and needs of people in places (Horlings, 2017).

Participatory planning and multi-stakeholder governance have recently become more compatible with place branding (Van Assche et al., 2016). The ‘nexus’ of place branding and planning can potentially become a site of policy integration, provided that both planning and branding practices are embedded in broader participatory governance structures. Ideally, this nexus could contribute to many common goals in place development, grounded in place-based qualities and assets. For instance, Oliveira and Ashworth (2017, p. 30) list four potential roles of spatial planners in place branding strategies that can help bring a spatial way of thinking into place branding: (1) spatial diagnosis (including trends, resources and place assets); (2) involving key place actors and supporting co-creation; (3) developing realistic, fair and agreed long-term visions and strategies, as well as short-term actions; (4) generating mutual understanding, building agreements and mobilizing influence in different arenas. However, it should also be noted that not every place can be planned or branded in the same way, and much has to do with the presence or absence of what can be described as (perceived) assets, qualities, objects, or flows which have a value for place development. Furthermore, a more careful observation of governance shows that combining planning and place branding strategies might not always be possible, nor desirable. Planning and branding can for example be located on different scales or levels of governance. The place in governance where possibilities for planning and place branding exist might not be the dominant site for strategy formation, significantly reducing the potential synergies (Van Assche et al., 2019).

In the editorial of this special issue, Van Assche, Beunen and Oliveira identify a typology of different possible linkages between planning and branding. Our contribution, in this respect, revolves around the issue of more radical participatory approaches to planning and branding. A more radically participatory exercise in governance might be appropriate in situations where a community wants to rethink itself, its future, its assets, to create a new arena for community reinvention, beyond representation and marketing. In the next section, we discuss a participatory exercise where creative methods were applied to develop a joint narrative between stakeholders.

2.2. The role of narratives in place planning and branding

Place-based narratives grounded in place identity are natural intersections of planning and branding efforts (Van Assche & Lo, 2011, see also Figure 1). As planning is necessarily a



Figure 1. Narratives in the nexus of place branding and spatial planning.

reshaping of place identity, a reshuffling and redefinition of assets, and a restructuring of place narratives (Scott, 1998; Hillier, 2002), it makes sense to engage with the narratives and assets as perceived by the various stakeholders, and build collective narratives on the future from there (Van Assche, Devlieger, Teampau, & Verschraegen, 2009).

Since the narrative turn among French structuralists in the 1960s, narratives have been widely used by variety of disciplines – and recently increasingly also in policies (Howarth, 2017; Veland et al., 2018). There are versatile ways to define and use narratives, but commonly two main approaches are discerned (Bruner, 1986): (1) narrative as a ‘mode of knowing’ by which people ‘make sense’ of the world or create order out of experience and (2) narrative ‘as a practice’ that uses sensory language and settings to build new knowledge, referring to the use of narratives in storytelling. We focus here on the latter, which in the context of place refers to narrative identification (Eckstein, 2003): how places are produced and reproduced through the telling and retelling of stories about them. The act of storytelling may affect how places are seen, since ‘stories that are persuasive can become constitutive for meaning making of social reality’ (Merkus et al., 2014, p. 570).

Narratives – both as a mode of knowing and process of building knowledge – are not only individual, but cultural. Our narratives are dependent on the socio-cultural contexts in which we are situated, as this context mediates our gaze into the world (Lichrou et al., 2017, p. 163). Narratives connect through our identities the past, present and future. Furthermore, narratives are also closely linked with values, affecting both the mode of knowing and production of new knowledge. Values are considered to be implicit in our description of the world and our place in it, and therefore the narratives we construct will embody values and orient us (Cheney, 1989, p. 132). Narratives can incorporate individual and societal values and inspire awareness, thus facilitating the creation of new moral and political projects (Iovino, 2012). They also have a spatial dimension, as they assign a sense to the events that happen in a given context by constructing them in a story, thus making them understandable (Iovino, 2012). To summarize, narratives of place can simultaneously incorporate continuity and change, values and identity.

Building on earlier work by Van Hulst (2012), Ameel (2017) distinguishes between three types of narratives in the context of planning:

- (1) narratives *for* planning, or the local narratives of an area, prior to the planning process (i.e. narratives that planners can draw on in their practices);
- (2) narratives *in* planning, or those that are authorized by planners, found in planning documents and activities (i.e. the planning process as storytelling);
- (3) narratives *of* planning, or the local narratives of an area *and* its planning, developed both simultaneously to and after the planning process (i.e. the storytelling that follows in the wake of planning practices). These include – but are not limited to – the narratives used for place branding.

A genuine connection between planning narratives (‘in’) and the local stories shared in a community (‘for’) is seen as a prerequisite for a more inclusive, democratic and sustainable planning, and sometimes as even crucial for the plan’s success (Ameel, 2017).

Against this background, it is not surprising that narratives might play an important role in processes of place-based development, and offer potential for planning and

branding efforts (Harris, 2009; Lichrou et al., 2017; Veland et al., 2018). According to Sandercock (2003) narratives may be used to facilitate community participation processes or support conflict resolution; they can redefine a community's identity and guide community action, and they can serve as a catalyst for change. Narratives have an ability to reveal and challenge the assumptions underlying the existing structure and practices, but also a capacity to imagine alternative futures (Lichrou et al., 2017). Accessing experiences through narratives does not automatically create a unified vision of what a place is or should be, however. The organization and interpretation of multiple narratives must therefore be undertaken in a reflexive manner, with an awareness of power relations, individual relationships and interactions in communities, the connections between past and present, and future desires and aspirations (Lichrou et al., 2017).

Although the role of narratives in planning has been acknowledged for some time, there is less research on 'how' narratives could be used in place planning and branding – although authors like Lichrou et al. (2017) have discussed the methodological considerations of narrative inquiry in place branding. According to Ameel (2017), narratives collected through participatory processes such as those of collaborative planning fall somewhat in between the 'for' and 'in' categories; they have a complex status, and double authorship – meaning that they can easily be appropriated or bended to specific purposes, and that they can be influenced by dominant narratives 'in' planning.

In the remainder of this paper, we will detail our proposed methodological approach for the inclusion of narratives in participatory place branding and planning, through the use of Arts-based methods and Appreciative inquiry.

3. A methodological approach to construct cultural narratives for planning and branding

3.1. Eliciting cultural narratives through art-based methods

The discussion of art in the context of planning and branding is generally focused on what planning can do to develop arts and culture (Jensen, 2007; Metzger, 2011). However, art can arguably play a more substantial role in place branding, as a way to unfold place-based narratives (Jensen, 2007). Despite the huge popularity of literature on the potential of art and the creative industries to positively transform cities, very little attention is directed towards the role of artistic practice in spatial planning and community development (Metzger, 2011; Sandercock, 2005).

Some authors make the case for the direct involvement of artists in the planning process. For instance, Metzger (2011) suggests that art and artists have the capacity to advance planning processes in ways that are difficult for planners and stakeholders to achieve on their own. Art and artists, he argues, can design and/or facilitate forums that can help 'set a new scene', thus creating a context where stakeholders are encouraged to use different language and different logics for reasoning than their habituated ones. Artists are granted a mandate 'to be strange', to act in ways that are not afforded to other agents of governance in planning processes. As a consequence, artists can thus create an environment that is (temporarily) depoliticized, in which various stakeholders can test new narratives and interpretations, and express them freely outside of the typical constraints of political discourse.

We believe that research and researchers have the potential to play a similar role to that of artists when they adopt art-based methods as part of their tools. Dieleman (2017) makes a distinction between artists as ‘agents’ in a processes of change, and ‘artfulness’ as a type of ‘agency’ on the other hand – and it is to the latter that we refer here. By arts-based methods, we refer to methods that engage participants in some sort of creative or artistic exercise. Advanced artistic skills or aesthetic sensibilities are not required from participants, since the aim is not to produce fine artworks, but to achieve research purposes through the active involvement of participants (Knowles & Cole, 2008). Instead, art is used as a tool to disrupt habituated ways of thinking and open up new imaginaries for the future (Pearson et al., 2018).

Developed in the realm of research, arts-based methods merge art, creativity and imagination to traditional qualitative research in order to expand its possibilities. In general art-based research practices, or ‘artful doings’ in the words of Dieleman (2017), draw on inspiration, concepts, processes and representation from the arts, helping researchers to access and represent several points of view that otherwise are overlooked by traditional research methods (Leavy, 2009). Art-based methods can also open spaces of possibility in people’s imagination and evoke transformative mind-sets that are conducive to meaningful changes (Pearson et al., 2018). In the context of planning, this means bringing to the tables new ways of seeing the present and future of a place from the eyes of its community, which can be used to inform inclusive forms of spatial interventions and design.

Depending on the way they are used, art-based methods can reinforce existing norms or conversely they can challenge us and inspire new cultural narratives (Dewey 1934/1989; Nochlin, 1988; Bradley & Esche, 2007). Particularly relevant for planning and branding is that art-based research practices provide a wide selection of tools to both explore existing narratives and construct new ones. Through this process, art-based methods also potentially support the reconstruction of perceived identities, allowing for new forms of collaboration.

3.2. Appreciative inquiry as an organizing framework

Arts-based methods provide the building blocks for our proposed methodology, but they need to be organized in a coherent framework. Given the aim to co-create cultural narratives of place for planning and branding, we propose that Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is capable of providing such a framework. AI is a framework for community engagement and change that integrates art-based and creative processes, mainly in the form of storytelling. It is an approach originally developed in the context of organizational change and personal interacting, but to our knowledge, it has not so far been used as a method in planning or branding.

AI’s approach is centred not around problems but on positive strengths and possibilities for change, expressed through narratives and rooted in underlying principles of what people consider as important. It starts from the uncovering of the very best in the shared experience of a social system, in the belief that ‘[t]he positive images that the parties share in the future can give direction to achieve the transformation’ (Barrett, Fry, & Wittockx, 2010, p. 11). This, in our view, is an important element to bring to the table in planning processes, where AI can be a useful tool to identify what local communities and

stakeholders perceive as assets, and which pathways of change they deem desirable. It is a generative approach, in which the future and the seed for change are encompassed in the conversations and stories approach (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). It is also a method to facilitate cooperation, joint learning and constructing narratives, which makes it a good fit in multi-stakeholder processes in the context of local and regional development.

On a practical level, AI is structured along the so-called '4-D Cycle', a process composed of four phases: 1. the 'Discovery' phase, in which people reconnect with their individual and collective strengths; 2. the 'Dream' phase, in which the focus is on creating shared images of the ideal future; 3. the 'Design' phase, where participants shift from imagery to actionable ideas; 4. the 'Destiny' phase, composed by any number of change initiative related to the topic that are ready to be implemented (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Here, we don't necessarily advocate for following rigidly all the steps outlined in the AI literature, which often refers to organizational processes and structures. However, we believe that planners could benefit from integrating the general principles underlying these four phases in their work in order to achieve greater inclusiveness.

Ideally, narratives for planning and branding are based on a community's shared vision(s) of the future (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). This may be in some cases challenging, if the community of a place is composed of culturally heterogeneous groups and the values and meanings of the place are not necessarily shared. Yet, telling positive stories about successes, ideals, values and vital concerns is a transformative act in itself, as the act of sharing positive stories leads participants into a state that favours discovery, new images and new perspectives (Fry & Barrett, 2001). In this state, positive narratives about possible futures of places are able to arise, which can then be introduced in an inclusive planning or place branding process. An additional benefit of the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, when applied to planning, is the potential to prevent the planning pitfall of jumping too quickly from problems to solutions, typical of linear, science-based thinking (Dieleman, 2017). Especially the Dream phase of AI opens up 'spaces of possibility' and stimulates ideas about what is considered desirable, instead of limiting the discussion to what might be feasible.

In this section, we have introduced the principles of our proposed methodological approach, namely the inclusion of art-based methods as a tool for eliciting new cultural narratives in the context of place branding or planning, and the positive approach of AI as an organizing framework. In the next section, we will put these principles into practice by outlining a participatory process we initiated in a Finnish town, with the aim to co-create new cultural narratives.

4. Building narratives in a multi-stakeholder process via appreciative workshops: the case of Mänttä

During the course of 2018, as a part of an ongoing research on sustainable place-based transformation, we organized a series of workshops in the Finnish town of Mänttä. The aim was to co-create cultural narratives with residents about the town, its current assets and future directions. The starting point from this process was the proposition that the inclusion of local residents in the construction of these narratives is beneficial for the ongoing processes of place branding and planning taking place in the town.

The recent history of Mänttä provides an interesting background to test our proposed methodology. Situated in the Pirkanmaa region of Finland, surrounded by forests and lakes, Mänttä was known as ‘the paper town’, and its identity was intimately linked to that of its paper and pulp industry. Technological and structural changes in the 1980s caused many workers to lose their jobs, and the dominant narrative in Mänttä started shifting towards that of a ‘dying’ rural town (Figure 2).

Building on its nationally important built heritage, and mostly on the significant art collections brought here over the decades by the family who owned the industry, Mänttä is now marketing itself more prominently as an art town. Its museums – including a new award-winning pavilion completed in 2014 – host some of the most prominent art collections in Finland (‘Serlachius Museums’, 2018), and various artistic events are hosted yearly by the city. Consolidating this newly constructed identity, the city of Mänttä-Vilppula has recently submitted a joint application with the nearby city of Tampere for the European Capital of Culture status in 2026 (City of Tampere, 2018).

The place is still undergoing a process of change. In 2004–2005, a local detailed plan was realized by the city with the overall aim of making the town more welcoming for pedestrians. This plan was never implemented, but it laid the foundation for a new detailed plan for the town centre, developed in 2015–2016. This plan was presented to the residents over the summer months of 2016 to collect comments and inputs, and a public meeting was held. Two of the authors met the town planning department for a first meeting in November 2016, during which the municipality expressed interest in participating to a research project and potentially implementing its outcomes in the plan. However, the road to the redevelopment of the town centre has been challenging, and financial issues raised important questions. In June 2017 the plan was put on hold, and at the moment of writing its future is still uncertain.

Despite the uncertain status of the plan, the planning department of Mänttä-Vilppula expressed an interest in continuing with the research project and gaining knowledge on local cultural narratives. The research project was carried out independently from the progress of the municipal plan, although contacts were maintained throughout. After an initial phase of exploratory interviews carried out over the course of 2017, a series of workshops were held between January and May 2018, with a conclusive workshop in September 2018.

The structure and content of the workshops were influenced by the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) outlined above – and specifically by its focus on the generative power of positive emotions (Bushe, 2007; Fredrickson, 2001). Given the complexity of a

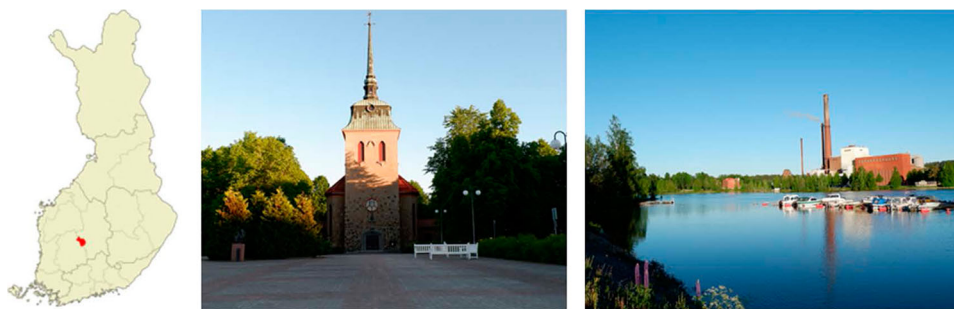


Figure 2. Mänttä's town centre and position in Finland.

planning process, and the lack of agency that many actors could realistically have on the implementation of any project, the process designed in Mänttä was limited to phases 1–3 of the 4-D cycle (as described in Section 3.2). The AI process mostly served as an inspiration and a guiding principle in the design of the workshops. The activities and exercises used to engage participants were informed by previous work on arts-based methods for transformative engagement (Pearson et al., 2018), to which one of the authors contributed.

The process was structured over time through the two phases of workshops (see Figure 3). In the first round, the focus was on the Discovery and Dream phases. The aim was to unveil the meanings and values expressed in existing cultural narratives about Mänttä (Discovery), and to co-create new storylines for the ideal future of the town (Dream) rooted in those meanings and values. The final workshop reconnected participants to these themes, and prompted them to further solidify their future storylines in terms of concrete steps to be taken (Design).

Collectively, the two rounds of workshop addressed two aims: (1) ‘understanding what is already there’ and (2) ‘envisioning the future of Mänttä’. In order to achieve the first aim participants were prompted to reflect on the meanings and values they attach to the town as well as the reasons why they deem them important, and to visually represent their shared narratives. This was achieved through a creative exercise called ‘Silent Conversation’ (Pearson et al., 2018), loosely based on the more established Concept Mapping – a participatory research approach that aims to produce a visual representation of the relationship patterns among qualitative data (Miller & Jones, 2015). Through this method, participants collectively cluster their inputs into a concept map. The process is carried out in silence, which enables a deeper state of reflection and prevents louder voices from dominating the conversation (Pearson et al., 2018).

As for the second aim, in the first round of workshops we prompted the co-production of a future narrative through the use of a hybrid method based on narrative principles and normative future scenarios called ‘Predict Future Headlines’ (IDEO, 2018; Pearson et al.,

	Art-Based Method	AI Phase
WORKSHOPS ROUND 1 (Jan-May 2018)	“Silent Conversation” Concept Maps: 1. Mänttä’s sense of place 2. Mänttä’s values	Discovery
	“Predict Future Headlines” + Collage: Mänttä in 2028	Dream
FINAL WORKSHOP (Sept. 2018)	Summary Concept Map	Discovery
	Collage: the best of Mänttä	
	Collage: Mänttä in 2028	Dream
	Storytelling: The road to the future	Design

Figure 3. The workshop process in Mantta.

2018). It is a playful way of helping participants project themselves imaginatively into the future, inventing positive stories that are worth celebrating, and expressing them as an imaginary headline from a newspaper of the future. We adopted this method in combination with collage-making, an easily accessible creative practice useful to harness intuitive knowing and aesthetic sensemaking (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010; Pearson et al., 2018).

The 'Future Headlines' produced in the first round of workshops served as a starting point and inspiration during the final workshop. Here, participants were asked to produce two collage images: a first one representing the 'best of what is' (Ludema, Cooper-rider, & Barrett, 2000) and thus consolidating discussions on the 'Discovery' phase; and a second one visualizing their desires for the Mänttä of the future, representing the 'Dream' phase. In the latter part of the workshop, using these artistic images as inspiration, participants were then prompted to create a storyline that would connect the present and future in a narrative form (see Figure 4).

5. Reflections and lessons learnt

The reflections we present here are based on our observations throughout the process facilitated in Mänttä, as well as feedback collected from participants during the workshops. The feedback suggests that the appreciative approach created positive feelings that supported a collaborative atmosphere. Participants overwhelmingly reported feeling happy and energized at the end of the workshop, and described the event as 'good', 'nice' and 'fun'. This positivity was reflected in the tone and content of the discussion during the workshops, with one of the participants reporting that 'almost all observations/remarks/notices were positive, which was surprising!' Another participant also noticed that, through the process, 'Negative attitudes transformed to positive' further corroborating this merit of the AI approach.

Framing the discussion around the principles of AI further resulted in a re-appreciation of assets that are often overlooked or taken for granted. Participants reported changing their perception about Mänttä in a positive way in a number of cases, either reflecting on the beauty of its nature, on the quality of life it affords them, or the many existing opportunities they often overlook. In the words of one local high school student, 'I really started to think that Mänttä is actually a very good place to live.'

In the 'Discovery' phase, the 'Silent Conversation' exercise (see Section 4) was useful in setting a common ground for the following debate and discussion. Through it, participants were able to express the values they attach to their town and to re-negotiate them in a



Figure 4. An example of visual representation of future narratives.

collaborative exercise. The making of a concept map allowed people to visualize the points of synergies and openly acknowledge the values that determined which issues were dearest to them. This is a crucial point because, in the words of Schroeder (2013, p. 144)

When implicit values and meanings are not acknowledged and respected, the decision process is more likely to run afoul of conflict and hidden agendas, and stakeholders are less likely to be committed to carrying out the decisions that are reached.

Or, as concluded by one of the participants, ‘In the end, the most important thing is that [values] are behind everything.’

The use of the arts-based method of collage and ‘Future Headlines’ supported the switch in thinking for the Dream phase, and allowed participants to project themselves into the future and to creatively express new narratives about what Mänttä could be. The feedback on these methods, particularly the collage, was overwhelmingly positive, and often indicated as preferred activity of the workshop. However, it was only partially successful in allowing participants to disconnect from the dominant narrative of the ‘problems’ faced by the town (depopulation, lack of jobs, etc.) and freely express their visions for alternative futures. Some participants reported it was useful to think about Mänttä and its future together with others in the workshop setting, and that the workshop allowed them to develop new thoughts or different perspectives. Others were more critical of the innovativeness of the proposals for the town, with one participant stating, ‘in my opinion nothing new came up’. Some key themes emerged throughout, like the value of the beautiful nature, the sense of pride for good local services and sense of community, and the importance of unique artistic history of the town.

The workshops in Mänttä have not been integrated as a formal element of the local planning process, and many barriers still exist to prevent such integration (Figure 5). In Finland, the planning system has a regulatory nature, where all levels of land use plans are legally binding and firmly defined in form, content and process by the planning legislation (Mäntysalo, Kangasojä, & Kanninen, 2015). At the start of this process, most of the ground work connected to the local plan had already been carried out, yet the planning department was eager to gain additional insight through the research. The knowledge gained through the process, and the lessons learnt through its experimental nature, therefore have potential to influence the future town development in some capacity.

Yet, the extent to which the town council will incorporate this information in their future activities remains to be seen. At the moment of writing, the detailed plan for the city-centre is on hold, and it is still unclear to what extent the results of the research will inform future iterations. The next steps will be to produce a report for the city council and to discuss the outcomes with town developers. The contact person of the



Figure 5. Participants during the workshops in Mänttä.

planning department, who was asked to comment on the future of the process, considers it important to hear the opinions of the residents and people who work in the town. Yet, impact of the research findings on the formal planning and political context is unsure. This indicates that although local governments may be willing to support an appreciative dialogue about shared narratives, timing is crucial to create connections with the formal planning process.

6. Discussion: implications for planning and branding

Our initial position was that, while spatial planning processes often start with a problem analysis, a more appreciative approach based on the symbolic meanings and values people attach to places would be more fruitful, and capable of mobilizing people around a shared narrative. We have argued in this paper that participatory processes involving arts-based methods and appreciative approaches can support the development of shared cultural narratives the nexus of spatial planning and branding strategies. Based on our experience, we propose that especially in places of transition – where new identities are constructed and governance interventions are prepared – new opportunities arise to introduce innovative practices that support the creative and joint development of cultural narratives.

Our key question was ‘how’ to support the creation of new cultural narratives for place branding and planning through art-based methods. Considering the reflections from the case of Mänttä, the methodology outlined in this paper suggests potential for the future. As AI focuses by design on bringing out the best in human systems (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003) it is particularly appropriate as an approach in place-branding, where the first step involves the creation of awareness and common understanding of endogenous development potential (Ray, 2001). When conditions foster positive emotions, people are more likely to consider new alternatives for action (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Furthermore, the AI process is designed so that it can be upscaled, and thus it has the potential to provide a tool for open planning processes that are truly participatory, and in which everyone can have a say on equal grounds.

While certain groups might be more receptive than others to the methodology we designed, we believe that our proposed approach could be adapted successfully in any context. Arts-based and creative methods have been shown in the literature to be effective in engaging marginalized and disadvantaged groups (e.g. Rasool, 2017; Sarkissian, 2005), while the AI approach has been used successfully in many different communities and workplaces. Yet, careful consideration should always be placed to design a process that reflects the specific needs of the community it is intended for.

Like any other method, this approach has its challenges and limitations. A potential issue is that leaving participants freedom to express their meanings and values – while granting them agency over the research process – bears the risk of facilitating the creation of undesirable narratives, or narratives that counter the stated aims of the process. This is not, however, a necessary feature of this methodology. Art-based methods can be used in a more directive way, allowing for workshops to be designed with the intent to elicit specific mind-sets or activate preferred frames (see Pearson et al., 2018), for example in the context of sustainability transformation. Yet, in doing so, the risk is that narratives are produced, influenced by the values of specific stakeholders (e.g. researchers or planners) instead of

reflecting the will of the community they are intended to represent. The role of the process facilitator is essential in avoiding this risk. This role includes skills in active listening, deep ethical considerations and reflexivity throughout the process.

Through the process we facilitated in Mänttä, we were able to identify a number of recurring themes in the narratives co-created by local residents, as mentioned in the previous section. However, this process must be approached with care, keeping in mind that the narratives co-produced alongside a planning process carry the risk of being influenced by dominant planning narratives (Ameel, 2017; see Section 2). Special attention should be placed to make sure that all voices are heard, and that the narratives brought to light through this process are not appropriated or used instrumentally to fit specific purposes. Issues like this unveil power-dynamics between different actors and stakeholders, that – when not handled carefully – can lead to discontent.

A further challenge of this approach – much like any participatory methods – is the issue of inclusivity and representation. Our experience in Mänttä proved that including unwilling people in the crafting of narratives is extremely difficult, and in our case low turnout was a hinder in the process. Careful targeting of specific groups and individuals might mitigate the problem, but ultimately the issue remains, and participatory planning processes are rarely as inclusive as they aim to be (Quick & Bryson, 2016).

7. Conclusions

It is impossible to speak of and look for one perfect form of planning, one perfect form of place branding, and one perfect relation between planning and branding (Van Assche et al., 2019). What can be done is investigating what are relevant issues and assets in each community, and look for forms of organization capable to support possible synergies between the two spatial strategies. However, situations can occur when spatial planning or place branding is more participatory than the other, for example when a community wants to rethink itself, its future, its assets. In such situations a more radically participatory exercise in governance might be in place using creative methods, to create a new arena for community reinvention and build a joint narrative.

In this paper, we have implemented such an exercise and proposed a methodological approach based on arts-based methods and AI, applied in a process of dialogue initiated through this approach in the town of Mänttä. Our first findings point to the following challenges and lessons learnt. First, branding and planning can mutually reinforce each other if place branding is considered from an endogenous development perspective and as a multi-stakeholder process. Place branding is not just what a place is about in the present, but about ‘making better places together’, adapting to future challenges, and including the development of new products and services. Ideally, place-branding is the co-creation of cultural narratives which support sustainable perspectives for the future. A process such as that initiated in Mänttä, informed by AI and arts-based methods, is supportive of place branding in this sense, and can be used as a tool to include local voices in the branding effort.

We have argued that the construction of cultural narratives forms the nexus of place branding and spatial planning. Narratives, in fact, can unify a community around a shared identity, guide community action, and serve as a catalyst for change. As such, the creation of narratives based on processes of sense-making may have an important

role in place-based transformation, challenging the assumptions that underlie the existing structures and practices in places. However, when participants have the freedom to express their meanings and values, while granting them agency over the research process, not all the narratives expressed might be desirable. We suggest empirical studies in different institutional and cultural contexts to analyse the potential of creating joint narratives in places.

The methodological approach we put forth in this paper, and its application outlined through the case of Mänttä, contribute to the theoretical planning debate on participatory spatial planning. Other authors before us have made the case for a greater involvement of the arts in formal planning processes (e.g. Metzger, 2011; Sandercock, 2005) and here we join their call. Our reflections on the process suggest that creative methods of facilitating participants to project themselves imaginatively into the future can result in unexpected, creative outputs and innovative ideas. These outcomes can inform and supplement the formal planning process of local governments and can strengthen community agency, contributing to greater engagement in more community-led forms of spatial planning.

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